

# Letters

## On autonomy and identity

SIR

Two recent articles in this journal<sup>1,2</sup> addressed the issue of autonomy. Both provided very interesting arguments.

Here, I address the connections between Spriggs's<sup>1</sup> approach to autonomy in disruptive conditions and Turner's<sup>2</sup> approach to social regulation of individual autonomy, introducing the connection between identity and autonomy in this context. Individual recognition of self-identity relates to the continuity of the self. This is essentially a connection between past and present, but the assumption of past-present continuity allows projection into the future. This projection merely states an expectation that future events will allow interpretation in such a way as not to endanger self-identity, that is, allowing for the past-present continuity in the future.

Autonomy is the capacity for decision regarding one's relation with the external world. Its major role is the preservation of the past-present continuity, allowing recognition of self-identity through the recognition of a coherent (meaning: continuous-like) way of conducting one's life - a sort of mastery over one's destiny.

Sudden turning points will happen from time to time, and some reinterpretation of self-identity will be needed to cope with such sudden changes (the process of growing). This reinterpretation is done regularly for minor turning points, but exceptionally important events will take a more ritualised process of self-reinterpretation - we call it grieving.

During this process of readjustment, there is a fragilisation of self-identity, and consequentially, of autonomy. As this process is more or less time-consuming, the lack of autonomy could be more or less prolonged. Such duration will be dependent on the intensity of the provoking event and on the space allowed for the unex-

pected in the person's attitude to life. Nevertheless, autonomy is essential to deal with the unexpected in such a way that identity is still self-recognisable.

In Spriggs's<sup>1</sup> presentation, it is the survivors' (those able to cope) accounts we hear. Through them, we also hear the others, those who had lost their self-identity, and their autonomy with it - the available time was not enough for their grieving. The present did not fit in with their perception of self-identity, and they were simply pushed by events without deciding or even acknowledging what was happening - humans without a present.

We have to recognise that there is wide variation in the time required to regain individual autonomy, and that this will be reflected in an individual's capacity for decision making. Some individuals will take whatever comes to them and make the most of it, keeping control of their identity and autonomy. Others are extremely dependent on external stability, and will take more time to regain their autonomous decision-making capacity. Society is a self-preserving entity, and does not rely on chance for survival. This unreliability of individuals to retain their decision-making capabilities, and this capability to re-interpret self-identity (creating a "new" member in place of the old) was recognised by societies (ie organised communities: family, profession, nation, etc); the development of those societies, tending to adopt those rules which would stabilise the community, created mechanisms to regulate the exercise of individual autonomy. These mechanisms consist in the partial surrender of individual autonomy to society, so the individual accepts society's decisions regarding private life. Those societies presented by Turner<sup>2</sup> as more intrusive in the individual's private affairs, can be recognised as those where marriage rules, family traditions in professional areas, and other "intrusive" rulings, persist for longer - the

"patriarchal" or "matriarchal" societies. The goal is to preserve individual identity, not as self-recognised, but as socially recognised. As this surrender is cultural and, as such, "built-in" as opposed to "coercive", it may be said that such surrender of individual autonomy is an autonomous act.

What I would like to stress is the need to support autonomy, if self-identity is to be recovered in such crises, and the need, also, to allow for the diversity of humanity, resisting the normative tendencies of society.

## References

- 1 Spriggs M. Autonomy in the face of a devastating diagnosis. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 1998;24:123-6.
- 2 Turner L. An anthropological exploration of contemporary bioethics: the varieties of common sense. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 1998;24:127-33.

## Disclaimer

The opinions stated are those of the author alone, his responsibility. They do not reflect the views or the practice of the Emergency Department or the North Staffs Hospital NHS Trust.

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## The ethics of xenotransplantation

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Jonathan Hughes's thorough examination of the ethical issues raised by xenotransplantation concludes that it is necessary to put a moratorium in place<sup>1</sup> and hence goes further than two recent UK reports on the subject.<sup>2,3</sup> He argues that the moratorium should stand at least until possible avenues for increasing the supply of human organs have been exhausted and until a more reassuring judgment can be reached on the prospects for preventing and